

American Dream

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The **American Dream** is the idea (often associated with the [Protestant work ethic](#)) held by many in the [United States of America](#) that through hard work, courage and determination one can achieve prosperity. These were values held by many early European settlers, and have been passed on to subsequent generations. What the American Dream has become is a question under constant discussion. Some believe that Americans now only dream of becoming fatter and richer than their neighbour.

The origin of the American Dream stems from the departure in [government](#) and [economics](#) from the models of the [Old World](#). This allowed unprecedented freedom, especially the possibility of dramatic upward [social mobility](#). Additionally, from the [Revolutionary War](#) well into the later half of the nineteenth century, many of America's physical resources were unclaimed and held out the promise of land ownership and lucky investment in land or industry. The development of the [Industrial Revolution](#) combined with the great natural resources of the enormous and as yet unsettled continent created the possibility of achieving wealth.

Many early American [prospectors](#) headed west of the [Rocky Mountains](#) to buy acres of cheap land in hopes of finding deposits of gold. The American Dream was a driving factor not only in the [Gold Rush](#) of the mid to late 1800s, but also in the waves of [immigration](#) throughout that century and the following.

Impoverished western Europeans escaping the [Irish potato famines](#) in Ireland, the [Highland clearances](#) in Scotland and the aftermath of [Napoleon](#) in the rest of Europe came to America to escape a poor quality of life at home. They wanted to embrace the promise of financial security and constitutional freedom they had heard existed so widely in the United States.

During the mid-to-late nineteenth century prolific [dime novel](#) writer [Horatio Alger, Jr.](#) became famous for his novels that idealized the American Dream. His novels about down-and-out bootblacks who were able to achieve wealth

and success helped entrench the dream within popular culture.

Nearing the twentieth century, major [industrialist](#) personalities became the new model of the American Dream, many beginning life in the humblest of conditions but later controlling enormous corporations and fortunes. Perhaps most notable here were the great American capitalists [Andrew Carnegie](#) and [John D. Rockefeller](#).

This acquisition of great wealth appeared to demonstrate that if you had talent, intelligence, and a willingness to work extremely hard, you were likely to be a success in life as a result.

Throughout the 19th century, immigrants fled the [monarchies](#) of [Western Europe](#) and their post-[feudal](#) economies, which actively oppressed the peasant class. These economic systems required high levels of taxation, which stymied development. The American economy, however, was built up by people who were consciously free of these constraints.

Settlement in the new world provided hope for egalitarianism. [Martin Luther King](#) invoked the American Dream in what is perhaps [his most famous speech](#):

"Let us not wallow in the valley of despair, I say to you today, my friends. And so even though we face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American Dream." etc. etc.

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Immigration

The American Dream, along with escape from persecution or war in one's home country, has always been the primary reason for [immigrants](#) wanting to come to America. Throughout its history, America has been seen as a place where the streets are paved with gold, and life is handed to you on a silver platter.

By the turn of the 20th century, the promise of the American Dream had begun to lure substantial numbers of immigrants from [Eastern](#) and Southern Europe. Huge numbers of Italians, Poles, Greeks, Jews, Russians and others came to find work in industrial cities such as [New York](#), [Chicago](#), [Philadelphia](#) and [Detroit](#). This wave of immigration continued until the outbreak of [World War I](#). Following the war, [nativist](#) sentiment led to new restrictions on immigration, which would continue until 1965.

The American Dream appears to have enduring appeal to many in other countries. The United States remains a magnet for immigrants today, receiving 1 million legal entrants annually--the highest such rate in the world. Whereas past generations of immigrants tended to come from [Europe](#), a majority of contemporary immigrants hail from [Latin America](#) and [Asia](#). Unknown numbers of illegal immigrants also enter the country annually, chiefly from across the southern border with [Mexico](#).

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The American Dream today

In the 20th century, the American Dream had its challenges. The Depression caused widespread hardship during the Twenties and Thirties, and was almost a reverse of the dream for those directly affected. Racial instability did not disappear, and in some parts of the country racial violence was almost commonplace. There was concern about the undemocratic campaign known as [McCarthyism](#) carried on against suspected Communists.

Since the end of [World War II](#), young American families have sought to live in relative comfort and stability in the [suburbs](#) that were built up around major cities. This led to the rise of the relatively conservative [1950s](#), when many

pursued the "perfect family" as a part or consequence of the American Dream. This period was shattered by a new generation of young people who embraced the hippie values of the [1960s](#), denying traditional values such as the American Dream. Though the drive to it waned during those years, the dream itself has never fully died out.

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Criticism

The concept of the American Dream has been the subject of much criticism by, for example, [Joseph Stiglitz](#). The main criticism is that the American Dream is misleading. These critics say that, for various reasons, it simply is not possible for everyone to become prosperous through determination and hard work alone. The consequences of this belief can include the poor feeling that it is their fault that they are not successful. It can also result in less effort towards helping the poor since their poverty is seen as "proof" of their laziness. The concept of the American Dream also ignores other factors of success such as the family and wealth one is born into and inheritable traits such as intelligence (although proponents of the dream would claim that starting wealth is irrelevant because of the belief that there is no level of poverty one cannot rise from with hard work).

The American Dream is seen by critics as being somewhat superficial or meaningless. Many literary works level exactly that criticism at the American Dream, such as [Arthur Miller](#)'s play *[Death of a Salesman](#)*. Such arguments are essentially rehashes of the old adage "Money doesn't buy happiness", and that perhaps not everyone's dream should be to achieve great monetary gain.

In particular some of the reasons the whole concept seems a myth to some are:

- In the U.S. it is sometimes difficult for children of poor families to attend college despite widely available [financial aid](#); not attending college sets upper limits on their career success, and it is difficult to earn a bachelors' degree — necessary for many fields — in one's free time

- once one begins working full-time.
- Limited economic mobility - The affluent have sometimes managed to convince the government to work to their advantage. For example, the recent repeal of inheritance tax and capital gains tax may work to further solidify the class system.
 - Economies of scale - It can be difficult to successfully start a business. One reason is because of the economies of scale necessary to survive in a [commoditized](#) market -- though many markets today are not commoditized.
 - Genetic lottery - Some may point at a few people like [Steve Jobs](#) who have made it big, yet research has suggested that features like height and race may give certain people some advantages over others.
 - Ethics difference - As in other countries, actions considered ethical vary between Americans. For example, a [CEO](#) who sees certain stock options as excessive monetary gain would find it harder to reach his or her American Dream than a more pragmatic CEO.

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